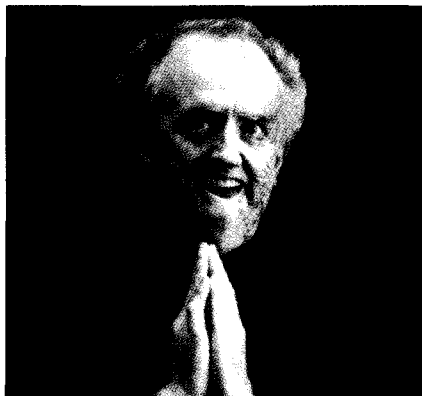




A Standing Ovation

Artists Receive Accolades in Winnipeg



David Roche

A HUSH COMES OVER THE audience as the curtain is pulled back to reveal a dark outline of a figure. And then the figure begins to speak. This is David Roche, and he is presenting his masterpiece: *The Church of 80% Sincerity*.

David, an international humourist and performer, presents his facial difference as unique and his message as universal. He begins, "I have learned that every person has feelings of being disfigured, of feeling different and in some way unacceptable. We all, no matter what our appearance or life circumstances, have to learn to value ourselves and the gifts we bring to the world."

This was indeed the message of *Challenging Stereotypes: A Celebration of the Arts in Community*, held in Winnipeg, March 25 to 27, 2004.

This event, hosted by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), was funded by the Office for Disability Issues, Government of Canada. It brought together from across Canada professional and non-professional artists with disabilities, teachers, youth, representatives from community-based arts organizations and health care settings, and members of the general public under the magnificent glass dome of Winnipeg's Millennium Centre to recognize the accomplishments of painters, sculptors, potters, dancers, mimes, actors and a choir. Arts enthusiasts were given the



Arts workshops gave event participants the opportunity to get creative.

opportunity to paint, dance, participate in improvisation and other workshops or just sit and soak in the talent.

The high marble walls of the Centre were filled with the work of participants involved in CCDS's Arts Ability, a two-year pilot project funded by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism, and the Office for Disability Issues, Government of Canada. Some of the research activities were supported by Ryerson University's School of Disability Studies through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant. On the evening of March 25, a manual and video launch showcased a guide to inclusive arts programming for people with disabilities, as well as activities at the research sites.

The research explored the social impact of arts programming on adults and youth with a variety of disabilities. Results to date confirm the value of arts programs, not only to participants, but also to staff, family and the community. As one participant points out, "Art is kind of like soul-searching; you get to know yourself, and then other people, as a result... my relationship to my family and friends has changed for the better."

David Roche adds that he brings "profound encouragement and empowerment to audiences to help them face change and challenges in relationships, on the job, in all phases of their lives."



Spirit Synott and Rachel Gorman

Later that same evening, Spirit Synott and Rachel Gorman performed a breathtaking integrated dance duet. Spirit, who uses a wheelchair, used the language of dance to reflect the strength and confidence of disability when it is accepting of the self. The way that the dancers searched, found and melded with one another was hauntingly beautiful.

Among the performers and speakers were: Geoff McMurchy, Society for Disability Arts and Culture; Tory Jimmy, Aboriginal dancer, Norway House Drama Group; the arts team from the Independent Living Resource Centre, St. John's, Newfoundland; Rolande Kirouac; Entr'Actes; and Puente Theatre.

During the standing ovation, the cheers and tears in the crowd following David Roche's presentation did not speak to the "courage of the disabled." Not in the least: his mixed bag of stream of consciousness thinking on middle age, sex, relationships, HIV and the priesthood left me with a sense of knowing and understanding more about myself and others.

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